

ETHICS IS CONFRONTED WITH PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE IN MUCH THE SAME MANNER AS OTHER PURSUITS OF TRUTH

This ToK essay is an example of where the student is both the source of knowledge and the resource for the critical analysis. It was written by a British female student at the Armand Hammer United World College in December of 1994.

I have always been a strong advocator of woman's rights, and it is my belief that I am better off coming from a society where girls are able and encouraged to become career women, than a society where women are expected to be homemakers. I have tended to look upon these countries with scorn as I wait for them to catch up with "liberal" society. Not only do I believe this as part of my own ethics but I go as far as to advocate it to others. I remember a recent conversation with a friend from a "conservative" Moslem nation. I had complete faith in my view and I tried to convince my friend that my country's attitude towards women is more correct than that of hers. She disagreed.

It was only a few days later that I was presented in my theory of knowledge class with the idea of "problems of knowledge". This challenged me to consider how I really knew that my beliefs are correct. This cast me back to the conversation with my friend. The more I thought about it the more I began to wonder whether I could be sure about my self-righteousness.

I didn't have to delve deep to discover the first problem of knowledge in this ethical debate. I considered the argument: I said that my country is better for women; she advocated that hers is. And yet neither of us had lived in or even been to the others country, so how could we possibly make such a strong judgment? We simply didn't have enough informa-

tion to take a critical standpoint on this issue and yet, there we were, both holding firm to our own (and now incomplete) point of view.

This led me to wonder where this ethical belief of mine had actually come from. As long as I can remember my parents have encouraged me to strive for the best. "Don't be a nurse", my father would say, "Be a doctor." "There is a wealth of opportunities for girls compared to when I was a girl," my mother would say. This was validated by my school, a liberal girls school, whose basic policy was "girls can do anything." My science teacher would tell us enthusiastically: "The opportunities for career women in this country are wonderful." In fact, this was the message I received from society as a whole.

Looking back it seemed that all I'd ever heard was that girls should strive for careers and how wonderful my country is because it provides all the opportunities for this. So is it really my own belief that women are better off in liberal society, or is it just the opinion of others that has been imposed on me for so long that I have adopted it as my own? This is an important problem of ethical knowledge—are ethical beliefs entitled to the same status, "knowledge", as, say scientific beliefs? If so, how do we know?

I decided to enter the mind of my friend and examine the origins of her belief that here country is right. In the course of our discussion I had learnt that

she too has parents who agreed with her point of view. More than likely she was made aware of their opinion on the role of women at an early age just as I was. Was this then her own belief or simply a continuum of what her parents believed? Interestingly enough, she also went to a girls school, but this was a strict Moslem school in which girls were not encouraged to aspire towards a career. In addition to this, she had the strong influence of her religion which sets down the "right" role of Moslem women. Upon reflection it seems clear that every major influence in her life has been geared toward the belief that she now holds, while every influential voice in mine has been in accordance with my view. It seemed that neither of us had really ever received both sides of the argument—a major problem in establishing ethical knowledge. It dawned on me that had I have grown up in her circumstances I quite possibly would not have the strong view I hold today but probably I would hold my friend's views.

So, had we both been tricked? We cannot both be correct as that would be a contradiction. Had we been holding on so strongly all these years to views we thought were our own but were really just a reflection of society? Did we just accept them without considering soundness and reasons for their claims? And how could either of us be right when we've both only really seen one side of the argument—that is, if I am right then I need to *know* this as well as believe it. Both my friend's and my own arguments began to look similar and very shaky.

Then a new thought crossed my mind. My friend is not the only person to present this point of view to me. I have friends back home who do not at all desire to be career women. I remember one friend commenting on the pressure that society places on her to become a working-woman and how much she

dislikes this. We've grown up in the same society, attended the same school, and her mother, like mine, is a working-mum. And yet we have opposing views. This tells me that it is not just society that has given me the beliefs for if it was then would not my friend and I then hold the same opinion?

When I reconsider I see that my belief is far from being unfounded. I have many examples and much evidence to back up my opinion. I have read articles and seen documentaries showing societies with views similar to mine as well as those that differ. This has given me a taste of both sides of the argument. From this I have been able to evaluate and reaffirm my viewpoint. Of course it could be argued that the media may be biased, which is indeed possible. This is another problem of knowledge: distinguishing between biased and unbiased information.

I can see that at the centre of my argument is a solid belief, that is, my opinion that women have the right to be treated equally to men. This is more than just an idea that I've heard and adopted from others. It is a belief deep inside of me; it is common sense to me. There is no argument to the contrary. All the evidence and experiences in the world could not persuade me to change my mind!

However, I am quite prepared to admit that there are problems of knowledge in this ethical debate. This ensures that neither me nor my friend can ever be certain that we're right. We have been exposed to different influences from which it is hard to distinguish where other's opinions end and our own begin. We can never experience the other's life which means we are missing parts of the other side of the argument. What I can be sure of, however, is that at this time and in these current circumstances, my view in this ethical argument is *right for me*.

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